

HIGHLIGHTING COMPLEX ISSUES

in your research project

Scientific and factual uncertainty or dispute

Sometimes natural scientists and social scientists do not yet have sufficiently reliable information to make a precise analysis or strong argument, or they provide us with conflicting data. Look for these gaps and discrepancies, and if directly pertinent to your paper, articulate the provisional quality of the data and support your use of that data.

- This data could refer to the current situation (e.g., type and level of pollution), effects of certain actions (e.g., jobs lost if environmental regulation goes into effect), history or causes of current conditions (e.g., temperature increase), etc.

Policy disagreements

Often policy makers and policy advocates disagree on the relative wisdom of a particular policy. Look for these debates, and if directly pertinent to your paper, summarize objectively the disagreements and the bases for the different views, and then argue for your particular judgment.

Policy disagreements may be based on:

- Different data used
- Different objectives
- Different priorities (e.g., relative importance of conserving wilderness and creating jobs)
- Consideration (or lack of consideration) of certain aspects of the issue (e.g., effect on the poor of other countries)
- Values (see below)

Disagreements over basic values

Some environmental disagreements concern basic values. In your paper, you should engage some of these issues and articulate and support your values.

- **Ethical values.** What kind and degree of ethical responsibility do we have to the poor, to future generations, to species? How do these values impact policy?
- **Social philosophy.** What type of society is ideal? For instance, should we be aiming at an economy that maximizes the “standard of living,” or should we be aiming at a society that maximizes the health of communities and diversity of cultures? Should we support corporations gaining additional strength, or should we aim at a decentralized society living within the limits of the bioregion? How is current society evaluated: positive view of corporate wealth which is the best way to help people, or a critique of injustice and oppression? Can we trust science and technology to solve problems in the future, or should we use the precautionary principle?
- **Philosophy of nature.** What is nature – resource for our use, a living system we should preserve, a community we are a part of and yet use? Does nature “care” if we clear-cut a mountain? What is our essential relationship to nature – are we separate and superior or a “plain citizen” of the land?
- **Epistemology and psychology.** What are the relative validity and the place of intuitive, emotional, and mystical awareness of nature?
- **Aesthetics.** What is the relative significance of aesthetic values to policy? How can we incorporate aesthetic values into policy?